

The Politics of Kindness  
Re. Linda Simmons

When I need to call myself to more accountability, to show up more fully, I often ask myself the question, "Who are you now Linda?" It is meant to wake me up. To call me to the present.

After seeing the photo of a man trying to cross from Mexico to the US drowned with his 23 month old daughter on the shores of the Rio Grande, his daughter tucked inside his tee-shirt for safety her arm flung around his shoulder, and reading a tweet that read, His Choice, I lose my answers.

When I hear American citizens telling other American citizens, freely elected representatives of this country, that others should go home, I no longer know how to answer, "Who are we now?"

Sometimes I have to just closed the shades and put on a fan and read fiction. [The Song of Achilles](#)<sup>1</sup> by Madeline Miller is my current escape.

Miller writes of so many jealous, wrathful, gods, that interfere when lustful or angered; and many other gods too: gods that heal, that offer sustenance, that punish when the rules of common decency have not been followed. Sometimes I long for the goddess of justice and mercy and kindness, Eleos, to make herself known, to descend from Mount Olympus and remind us, we forgetful mortals, what justice, mercy and kindness mean.

But alas, I am not Greek, nor do I believe in the gods. I believe in human beings. I believe that we must be the embodiment of what we wish to see in the world. I bend my knees in desperate prayer sometimes, but not to an all-knowing, all-seeing god. I pray to the human heart to remember what is good, right, worthy of writing, remembering, telling. Gary and I often go running at Sanford Farms and we always stop at the end, in the shade of the little pine forest, calling us through long and sunny drenched stretches of dirt road, and say what we are grateful for. They are usually simple things: relative health, this life we have here with all of you, the wind, the green of the trees. The other day it struck us both that this helps us be kind to one another, this gratitude, the sweaty, breathless moment of praise for what is yet good.

Kindness. The very word seems to be losing value in our world. It is too soft, we say, too meek, too unarmed to make a difference that matters.

And then I found the Kindness Project that Kelly Knox, a congregant in the Unitarian Gloucester Church, developed and I invited Jason Bridges, our thoughtful selectperson, to come for over and sift it through with me. We're hooked now!

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<sup>1</sup> Madeline Miller, [The Song of Achilles](#), (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

The Kindness Project was developed, in part, from Kelly's reading of a paper called "Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy" by Julia Unwin, Carnegie Fellow.<sup>2</sup>

Unwin begins her paper talking about how kindness has always been part of public policy and the market. She cites giving blood as an example and the many social initiatives that are formulated to ease the burdens for so many trying to survive in this inequitable world.

But can kindness be a political driver? Does it have the bandwidth, the relative objectivity that we so value, and can it weigh fairness for many rather than for the few which public policy claims is a strength of ration decision making?

Public policy has two languages, and folks are usually fluent in only one: either the language of rationality which assesses value added, allocation, regulation and impact and the language of kindness which assesses loneliness, identity and belonging and friendship.<sup>3</sup>

We hear the language of rationality spoken when we wish to make policy changes, like building a new nursing home on our island and we hear the language of kindness spoken when people lift up the needs of our elders to have and see physical beauty, the ocean where the facility is now, or the conversations about the social merit of having all elders housed in one unit so they feel connected.

We argue from one place or another during.

Both languages have strengths and weaknesses. Rationalism is a good tool for assessment and evaluation. It provides measurable goals and can be fact checked. But it can miss what people really want and why. It also often misses privilege and its powerful but unacknowledged motivations. And though the language of kindness is a good tool for assessing what people really want and need and it can lead to self-righteousness and offer solutions to complex situations that are naïve.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Urwin, "Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy" Carnegie UK Trust, 2018  
[https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie\\_uk\\_trust/2018/11/13152200/LOW-RES-3729-Kindness-Public-Policy3.pdf](https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2018/11/13152200/LOW-RES-3729-Kindness-Public-Policy3.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 11

Urwin believes that we have not brought kindness into public policy yet because historically, people who need kindness have been considered weaker than those who give it. People who need kindness are older, less able, have fewer resources, less education. It has a top down aspect that is demeaning.

This narrative keeps us all from combining rationality and kindness into a new language. It also keeps us from claiming our interconnectedness and common humanity.

Unwin suggests that we fear kindness, unless we are in control of giving it, because we fear being in need, being vulnerable, and being labeled as people who are a drain on the system.<sup>5</sup>

Perceptions of kindness need a major overhaul.

Public policy is always engaged in the politics of kindness but does so without acknowledging this source that could lead to connection and understanding if named and claimed. It is public policy that educates children, cares for the sick, makes gun laws, boosts economies, provides affordable housing. What would it mean to do this not only as a way to build stronger, more equitable communities but also as a way to increase the sense of self worth and dignity for all of us, to reinforce our need for one another to go on in our full humanity, together?

As Stephanie Kaza writes in her book Green Buddhism, we learn being brought up in this culture a kind of “conditioned distance”<sup>6</sup> that keeps us from experiencing vulnerability, lack of control and the unique but often painful narratives that exist all around us.

As Unwin writes, “To imply that consistency guarantees the fairest response ignores both the massive inequalities of voice and agency, and also the hugely different experiences people have. And what is more, it ignores the professed preference of everyone receiving any public service: for their individuality to be acknowledged, to be met with warmth and to be treated with kindness.”<sup>7</sup>

If we are really to make kindness matter, and we must, then there are some decisions we must make about how the goals of public policy, which are good goals: fairness, professional boundaries, and risk management, can be balanced with the goals of learning to see and understand one another and making that matter.<sup>8</sup>

The Scottish Government in 2018 adopted kindness as one of its core values in its 2018 National Framework. It establishes kindness as one of the things for which government, and public services, can be known for, and is something which all Scotland’s citizens can expect.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Kaza, Green Buddhism (Boulder: Shambala Publications, 2019), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Urwin, 22

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 29.

It is a piece of statecraft this is ground breaking and significant. And it has well recognized implications in a number of directions but specifically:

Measuring and auditing for kindness

Policy design for kindness

Regulating for kindness

In Scotland, it's not just about being nice. In doing this work, they have learned about the lives of their fellow citizens, formed deep human connections, and become advocates for a fairer world.<sup>9</sup>

A politics that includes kindness could break down the barriers between us and ensure that the loneliness of disability, the grief of sudden illness and bereavement, the challenge of adolescence and addiction and homelessness do not remain secret and hidden.

A policy of kindness changes relationships between people, and inevitably demands a change in the relationships between people and institutions and organizations, a change that builds trust, communication and new outcomes to be considered.<sup>10</sup>

Nantucket has a strategic plan. It focuses on 3 goals: housing, transportation and environmental stewardship. All of these goals reside under the umbrella of sustainability. What if we defined sustainable not only as balance of current needs and policies in relation to today and future generations, but as something that requires a policy of kindness to be viable?

What if we on Nantucket measured our policies against a kindness factor in which we considered who was left in and out by a policy, how people at and not at the table will be effected by this policy and how we can implement this policy considering not only efficiency, cost analysis and objective measurability, but also by how it will change people's lives in good and difficult ways? What if we did this by being in relationship to the people these policies affect and building trust, accountability and understanding?

The housing goal on the town's strategic plan is about affordable housing, which is so important. But if we include a lens of kindness, a lens that forces us to consider who is not able to afford affordable housing or who do not have the necessary behaviors or social abilities to enter affordable housing, we come to those who are homeless.

What would a kindness policy ask us to do in relation to homelessness? What relationships would it ask us to nurture, what questions are we not asking, what risks are we too afraid to take as we sit around board tables in laundered clothes and take notes with clean hands?

We are blessed on Nantucket to have many strong, accountable, thoughtful and open hearted public leaders.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 32, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 40.

Select person Jason Bridges and I have decided to begin this conversation and see where it takes us. We will begin with three Kindness Project Cafes where we will try to walk deeper into the work of kindness by asking questions like: what is kindness, what does it look like, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Is kindness always kind? What makes it difficult to be kind?

Kindness increases safety and trust in communities. Kindness takes responsibility for living in an interconnected web of which we are all an equal part.

Kelly Knox from the Gloucester UU Church, who developed this project, will be coming to our pulpit on Sunday September 8<sup>th</sup> to talk to us more about how we can initiate this on Nantucket and then also doing a presentation at 2pm at the Atheneum the next day. Soon after, Jason and I will organize our first potluck dinner at the Handlebar Café to begin this conversation as a community.

Let's keep this conversation alive. What does it mean to you to be kind, not only by practicing random acts of kindness or being in caring relationships, which are so important, but what might kindness look like as a public policy?

Kindness is disruptive, and as a political project, it is a type of relationship that cannot leave us unchanged as it demands that we risk something. And, it also gives us back to ourselves and one another more fully human, more fully connected, more woke.

It is time we mine kindness for its riches and its dangers and see what we and kindness might have to offer the world around us. I am in need a political project that fosters hope. Are you?

I look forward to Kelly Knox coming to talk to us about this some more and to our first potluck in September to unwrap this more deeply, to be in conversation with one another, to agree and to disagree, learning ever more fully what and who we are together.

Amen.